Knowing how to properly pronounce Sanskrit is a crucial skill for serious students and teachers of yoga.

This sacred language originated from oral traditions developed to communicate the spiritual insights of ancient sages. Because Sanskrit is the language of yoga, understanding key Sanskrit terminology and its pronunciation can deepen a practitioner’s knowledge of the yogic path. It can also provide a more complete understanding of the meaning and purpose of yoga āsanas, or postures—an understanding that is lost when these āsanas are known only by their English names.

Sanskrit is said to have been divinely revealed to meditating sages thousands of years ago. One story tells of Šiva beating his damaru drum fourteen times and creating the Sanskrit alphabet. These fourteen “Maheśvara Sūtras” form the beginning of the text defining Sanskrit grammar. The alphabet is perfectly designed for the human vocal apparatus, and the sound of each word represents the subtle energy of its meaning. Because each syllable is either one or two beats, pronouncing correctly allows one to feel the natural rhythm of the language and imbibe the true essence of the word. Sanskrit is called Devavāni or “language of the Gods” because it is said that the Gods understand and communicate in Sanskrit. Thus, sacred ceremonies like births, weddings, deaths, and religious rituals all involve Sanskrit chanting. The sound of the Vedic hymns is their life, preserved by thousands of generations through chanting.

Because Vedic wisdom was passed down orally long before it was written, no one knows when it actually began. The Vedas are the earliest known Sanskrit writings, beginning with the Ṛg Veda whose written form dates back to at least 1500 BCE. The subsequent three Vedas (Sāma, Yajur,
and Atharva) are all derived from the Ṛg Veda. The Upaniṣads, which form the basis for Vedānta philosophy, are extrapolations and summaries of the Vedas. Taken together, the Vedas and their offspring Upaniṣads are known as sruti, meaning “heard,” because they are considered to be of divine origin, originally revealed by enlightened seers.

Yoga, along with Āyurveda (Indian medicine), Jyotisha (Indian astrology), and countless other branches of Vedic wisdom, was passed down orally and literally using the refined Sanskrit language. Śūtras, terse aphorisms packed with information and easy to memorize, were often composed to record ideas in the most efficient way possible. Only with the help of a teacher and/or a commentary could a student learn the depth of their meaning. Verses were also written in rhythmic meters, most commonly four lines of either eight or eleven syllables each. Chanting or singing these verses provides another natural and easy way to remember them by heart.

Yoga in the West is often largely focused on practicing physical postures (āsanas). However, āsana is in fact only one of eight distinct limbs of yoga (see Aṣṭāṅga). Knowing the posture names in Sanskrit allows teachers and students to unambiguously refer to a posture. Using the English translation as the reference may be confusing because translations can differ—the same posture may have several different English names. In addition, fully comprehending all parts of an āsana name can provide a deeper understanding of its form and function. Noticing how the same word is used in several different posture names will reveal subtle nuances that would otherwise be lost. The Indian process of learning is largely based on viewing an object from a variety of angles, thus seeing it in its complete form.

The purpose of this book is to preserve and encourage the correct sound and spelling of Sanskrit chants and terms related to the science of yoga. This provides a reference for yoga practitioners who wish to perpetuate the vocabulary of yoga in an accurate and respectful way. Seeing terms grouped together in logical arrangements allows one to visualize their relationship to each other.
We hope your journey on the path of yoga will expand and brighten as you experience the audio and visual energy of this beautiful language.

**SANSKRIT PRONUNCIATION NOTES**

*Vowel combining:* In Sanskrit, when two vowels meet they will combine into something else. For example, “paścima uttānāsana” becomes “paścimottānāsana” and “marīci āsana” becomes “marīcyāsana.”

*Consonant combining:* In Sanskrit, if the final consonant of one word is not sound-compatible with the initial consonant of the next word, the final consonant may change. For example, “śaṭ mukhī” becomes “śanmukhī,” “tiryac mukha” becomes “tiryaṇmukha,” and “catur pāda” becomes “catuspāda.”

Some Sanskrit sounds are pronounced slightly differently in North and South India. The “v” might sound like a “w” and the “ś” or “ṣ” may sound like a “sh” or a “s.”

There are some differences between Sanskrit and Hindi pronunciation. In Sanskrit, when a word ends with an “a,” the “a” is pronounced. In Hindi it is often dropped, even though it is written the same way. For example, the Sanskrit “āsana” sounds like “āsan” in Hindi.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sanskrit</th>
<th>Hindi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“a” at the end of a word is not pronounced</td>
<td>“a” at the end of a word is often not pronounced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ā” at the end of a word is long</td>
<td>“ā” at the end of a word is pronounced a short “a”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“ph” pronounced as an aspirated “p”</td>
<td>“ph” pronounced like “f”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXPLANATORY NOTES**

The images at the beginning of each section are the geometrical representations (yantra) of each elemental cakra. Each yantra conveys the energy that matches the associated cakra. The Sanskrit sound in the center of each yantra is that cakra’s primary sound, a single syllable ending in “m.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SECTION</th>
<th>CAKRA LOCATION</th>
<th>ELEMENT</th>
<th>PRIMARY SAPSKRIT SOUND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chants for Your Practice</td>
<td>throat</td>
<td>space</td>
<td>haṁ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoga Terms</td>
<td>heart</td>
<td>air</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asṭāṅga Sequences</td>
<td>navel</td>
<td>fire</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Āsana Names</td>
<td>reproductive area</td>
<td>water</td>
<td>vaṁ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indices</td>
<td>base of the spine</td>
<td>earth</td>
<td>laṁ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

If you cannot find the Sanskrit āsana name in the A–Y section, look in the Āsana Name Synonyms index (page 118). Use the English Name Index on page 120 to locate the posture by English name.

The line drawings are intended as a general representation of each posture. Some variations are not shown. Many postures have several different names, and one name may be used for many postures. The names included here are drawn from the classical systems of yoga and the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar and T.K.V. Desikachar. The first three series of K. Pattabhi Jois’ Asṭāṅga system are given separately.

Many Sanskrit terms are very complex and difficult to translate into English. Because of this, the suggested meanings are not meant to be definitive. I chose to provide the literal definition for most āsana names. For yoga terms whose common meaning is different than the literal, the literal meaning is shown in quotation marks.

**Asṭāṅga Sequences**

In Sanskrit the consonants are used to count variations of a posture. So ka=a, kha=b, ga=c, gha=d.

Several postures are not specifically named in the series but are done as transitory postures. These are indicated with an asterisk*.

Many teachers have modified the first series in different ways, usually adding or deleting postures. The first series presented here is based on K. Pattabhi Jois’ own writing in Sanskrit. The second and third series are consistent and drawn from the knowledge of senior practitioners.
The first and last postures (Samasthiti and Utpluti) are pronounced with an “h” on the end by most practitioners. Even though this is inconsistent with the remaining āsana names (which are not pronounced with their ending “m”), out of respect for convention it remains that way here.

Many names in the third series are different than in the A–Y section. For example, “paścimottānāsana” in the A–Y section is spelled “paścimatānāsana” in the Aṣṭāṅga section.
CHANTS FOR YOUR PRACTICE

Seven common chants recited as part of a yoga class

Seven yoga sūtras relating to the definition of yoga and āsana
Sanskrit is a very rhythmic and musical language that lends itself well to singing and chanting. Each syllable is either short (one beat) or long (two beats). Recording the ancient wisdom in standard meters enabled easy memorization via chanting, and therefore provided a useful means of preserving Vedic wisdom over time. The first chant, to Gaṇeṣa, is from the Ṛg Veda, the oldest Sanskrit text, written over 3500 years ago. You can tell that it is a Vedic chant by the tonal marks above and below the letters. A horizontal line below a syllable indicates a low tone, no mark means a middle tone, and a vertical line above denotes a high tone. If there are two vertical lines above, you use a middle tone for the first beat, then a high tone for the second beat. Follow the written text as you listen to the CD and you will hear the three tones clearly.

The vast majority of Sanskrit verses are written in meter, usually four lines long with each line being a set number of syllables. The most common meters have either eight or eleven syllables in each line. All chants included here except the first two are in eight or eleven syllable meter.

The sound Om is thought to be the original sound from which the entire manifest universe began. Om itself is believed to contain all other sounds and therefore all forms of energy. It is very common to begin and end a chant with Om.

Chanting to a deity invokes that deity’s energy, and is an auspicious way to begin a practice or endeavor. Traditionally, throughout India, Gaṇeṣa is worshipped first, being the remover of obstacles and bestower of goodness and abundance. After a chant to Gaṇeṣa, one performs a chant appropriate to a particular activity, whether it be a practice, meditation, new undertaking, etc. All chants should be recited with a respectful and devotional attitude.
Gaṇānām Tvā (Ṛgveda 2.23.1)

A mantra to Gaṇeṣa, the elephant-headed deity who removes obstacles and grants protection.

Among all of Śiva’s attendants, we invoke you Gaṇeṣa, the seer of seers, the most glorious and eminent, sovereign of all brahmans. Oh Lord of Brahman, having heard us, sit nearby with all (your) protective energies. Salutations to the great and magnificent Gaṇeṣa!
Chant to Sarasvatī

To invoke the energy of speech and learning.

DISC 1, TRACK 2

Who is pure white like a garland of jasmine, the moon or snow, covered with white clothing; whose hands are decorated with a vīṇā, boon, and staff, seated on a white lotus; ever worshipped by the gods led by Brahma, Viṣṇu, and Śiva; may she, divine Sarasvatī, who removes all darkness, protect me.
Yogena Cittasya

To Patañjali, author of the *Yoga Sūtras*. Often chanted at the beginning of a yoga practice or sūtra class.

I am a deep bow with hands folded to Patañjali, the most excellent of sages, who removed impurity of consciousness through yoga, impurity of speech through word (grammar), and impurity of the body through medicine (Āyurveda).

In the form of a man up to the shoulders, holding the conch (divine sound), discus (wheel of time), and sword (discrimination), thousand-headed, white, I bow respectfully to Patañjali.

To the magnificent endless one, the king of the nāgas, salutations, salutations.